
Citation:

Jameson, S (2016) Leeds Beckett University's Holistic, Institutional Approach to Academic Integrity. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 4 (2). 71 - 72. ISSN 2051-9788 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v4i2.226>

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Leeds Beckett University's Holistic, Institutional Approach to Academic Integrity

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ABSTRACT

This opinion piece argues that universities need to take a more holistic institutional approach to academic integrity. It outlines how Leeds Beckett University has attempted to do this through the development of academic integrity policies and practice which aims to ensure fairness and consistency across our University.

Keywords: academic; integrity; holistic; institutional

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2014) suggested that:

“Ensuring that students do not obtain awards through any form of unacceptable academic practice relating to assessment – including plagiarism, cheating, collusion and impersonation – is fundamental to securing academic standards”. (p. 21)

All universities would claim that they attempt to ensure that students do not obtain awards through unacceptable academic practice, and as Glendinning (2014) argues, “Most higher education institutions would claim to have policies for handling academic misconduct and plagiarism. However there are important questions to explore for every institution about how consistently and fairly the policies have been implemented and whether they are effective at discouraging, detecting and penalising cases of plagiarism”.

Carroll and Appleton (2001) suggest that: “Once plagiarism has been detected, it is important that it is dealt with fairly, consistently and in accordance with the principles of natural justice” (p. 5). Carroll and Appleton maintain that the most effective way to deal with plagiarism is by taking a holistic, institutional approach.

This opinion piece addresses how Leeds Beckett University has attempted to introduce a more holistic, institutional approach to academic integrity.

Prior to this institutional holistic approach, academic misconduct was dealt with in a relatively informal and decentralised way. Students discussed instances of suspected academic misconduct with their course leader and penalties were decided by examination boards locally, rather than centrally.

In pursuit of a more holistic approach, Academic Integrity Leads were introduced in each faculty. These colleagues implement academic integrity policy and promote academic integrity in their faculties and throughout the University. Each lead is supported by a team of Academic Integrity Co-ordinators. These co-ordinators conduct the interviews with students in cases of suspected academic misconduct. They support module tutors who may not be as familiar with the University regulations and procedures regarding academic integrity. These ‘specialists’ are more familiar with the University regulations and procedures regarding academic integrity and have become much more confident when dealing with cases of suspected academic misconduct, especially if the case is complex. This approach has ensured that there is much more consistency across the University in the interpretation of the regulations and procedures and this has resulted in a fairer approach for students which is a consequence of a higher degree of consistency.

Prior to this attempt at a more holistic approach, decisions on cases of proven academic misconduct were decided at individual examination boards. In the new approach, a University wide Unfair Practice Board was introduced and all cases of admitted or proven academic misconduct go to this board which meets once a month. This is a vast improvement on the previous system for allocating penalties for academic misconduct. The Unfair Practice Board meets on a regular basis and decisions are made by the same four faculty representatives every month which makes the decision making much more fair and consistent for all students. This works very well and students and staff are aware of when this board meets and know when to expect the outcome of their case. Previously, students might have waited until the end of the academic year for a decision from the examination board on any case of academic misconduct. This new, more holistic approach ensures that this no longer happens.

More recently, the University has set up an additional group called the Academic Integrity Group. This group focuses on sharing good practice on academic integrity throughout the University. This group is made up of academics, librarians, representatives from the students’ union and administrative staff.

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In summary, this project has made a significant difference to the way in which Leeds Beckett University embeds academic integrity and deals with academic misconduct. The University has put a lot of effort and resources into improving its policies and procedures and has developed a more systematic, fair and consistent approach to academic integrity for the benefit of our students. The University policies and practices to support academic integrity are more rigorous and are implemented more consistently than in the past and it is argued that this can only occur when a more holistic, institutional approach is adopted. It is also argued that this has only happened as a result of this new approach and it is suggested that other universities could usefully implement some of this practice.

Leeds Beckett is a large, complex University and the results of this initiative have been shared internationally and have impacted on practice on other universities beyond the UK.

Biography

Stephanie Jameson is a Principal Lecturer for Learning, Teaching and Academic Integrity in the Carnegie Faculty at Leeds Beckett University. She is the Faculty Academic Integrity Lead and the Carnegie Faculty representative on the University Unfair Practice Board.

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